Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
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Meritocracy gone wrong: The "winners" and "losers" of learning in European education systems

Report on Inequalities in Education

Submitted to the EU-CoE youth partnership

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Introduction

The desire to improve young peoples' access to and support in education thereby maximising the value of their 'educational experience' is prominent within policy discourse, with numerous initiatives and enterprises at national, local and European levels. This general objective seems to be related to increasing Europe's store of human capital by securing young peoples' entry to the job market having provided them good-quality education and therefore enhancing their employability; a successful career assumed to follow close behind an initial period of insecurity in the search for work. Indeed, this is mirrored in almost all European strategic documents which discuss the importance of Europe's global participation in knowledge economies alongside other international powerhouses and a commitment to economic competitivity by ensuring its young citizens are active as 'highly-skilled individuals' in the labour market. The main way this has been set out to be achieved is by encouraging them to get a university degree and which is why European institutions aim to ensure 40% of all young people have completed higher education by 2020 and that those entering and graduating reflect the diversity of Europe's populations. We can safely call those successful in this process the "winners" as it were. They come predominantly from a middle to upper class bracket: they are likely to be someone who progresses through the education system, does well, gets a job and therefore avoids the pitfalls of poverty, perpetual unemployment and long-term and multi-dimensional forms of exclusion.

Yet despite European initiatives, and 'commitments' to eradicate inequality in education and improve social inclusion, education channels at different levels remain difficult to access for millions of young Europeans. Furthermore, millions more drop out of formal educational opportunities, failing to 'take advantage of the opportunity' presented to them to construct their own futures. From what I can see, there exist two main groups who 'fail' in this respect. Firstly, numerous young people middle to lower class bracket - which is quickly expanding in size - who with the promise of 'hard work' come through the education system, in some cases having tried hard, yet reaping no rewards. It is some of this very same group which also become disillusioned with this very system and drop out of education channels, thereafter encountering difficulty in the labour market yet finding safety with the allure of consumer market distractions. The longer they are in this predicament, the greater they risk the potential of illegitimate careers. The second group live a far more precarious existence in mostly urban areas and are spatially and socially excluded, barely access education and other formal training opportunities for which automatically confines many to a life in the margins of informal economies and criminal activity. Though these two groups are distinctly different, they are the "losers" of the education system, and in many ways, also "lose" in life in the sense that a) they can't "win" despite trying and/or b) they don't "win" because the odds are massively stacked against them.

This article is about untangling what determines how and why the "winners" win and equally how and why the "losers" lose. In a competitive social system - in this case one which functions around neoliberal economics and meritocracy - an ideological philosophy pervades around an individual's capacity to rise above their socio-economic circumstances, develop 'personal resilience' in the belief that with 'hard work' and 'individual achievement', anything is possible, even in these turbulent economic times. I will show how the "winners" - already culturally

accustomed to personal performance as a mode of success - make use of this system because of their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and manage their gumption throughout their educational careers and beyond into the labour market while how the "losers" adhere to the same ambitions. They too are expected to work themselves into opportunity and out of their poverty and disadvantage although they encounter various impediments along the way. Competition always brings with it "winners" and "losers" and success for some comes at the expense of someone else meaning that not everyone reaches their desired destinations. This is particularly problematic as increasing inequality continues to sideline swathes of young people from a route to a better life. Given that his is the case, we have to question the efficiency of our current pathway and, in the context of this article, precisely how education systems determine this itinerary. The article is made up of segments of field notes and interview data from my previous research projects, some images to highlight my argument and is bolstered by document evidence. Firstly, I begin by framing inequality in a broader context.

Thinking outside education: Inequality in context

From the mid-1970s onwards, the world advanced into uncharted territory: into one of uncertainty, risk and precariousness. From this period onwards an increasing global, neoliberal agenda - based in principle on free-market economics and individualism - led to the dismantling of the post-war golden age of high employment, welfare, stable family structures, and consensual norms and attitudes. It left in its place market and economic instability, 'risk', potential ecological catastrophe, high unemployment, and increasing social inequality sharpened by welfare reduction and a criminalisation of the 'underclass'. These are neoliberal economics which are concerned with deregulation and removing perceived restraints which impede profit, resulting in the downsizing of traditional industries, the dominance of global markets and rising unemployment and the growth of low-paid work (Standing, 2011).

While the rich and poor divide continues to grow at the expense of the manipulation of the indices of poverty, deprivation and unemployment, the world continues to experience variations of social unrest, civil war and political and financial instability – largely because of the impotence of quality politics which works for the people. It's now clear that the global financial meltdown of 2008 was an event of truly historical proportions. Initially at least, when the crisis first hit, it seemed to signal the exhaustion of a particular capitalistic epoch and open up the possibility that something new might take its place. A strutting, self-satisfied neoliberalism – and the abstract financial markets that had become central to its economic functioning – appeared to have dropped off the edge of a steep cliff, and only the tax revenues of ordinary workers in the real economy could save it. Before the crash, minimally regulated free-market capitalism had defeated all alternative models of economic organisation to become the pure common sense that all mainstream politicians took for granted. In the months that followed the crash, as the scale of the endemic mismanagement and greed that had carried the global economy to the brink of catastrophe became clear, previously bullish free-market ideologues appeared chastened and contrite and the neoliberal model itself was subject to stinging rebuke.

In the context of Europe, the political and economic ramifications have seen a) sharp increases in inequality and, as a consequence, 2) motivation among many young Europeans to move to

other countries in an effort to counter political neglect and potential poverty at home. For example, in the context of the former, an Oxfam report (2015) confirmed that almost no European country has been exempt from rising inequality. In particular, the report highlighted:

- German, Greek and Portuguese citizens see the highest levels of income inequality before taxes and transfers, such as welfare benefits, are accounted for.

- Inequality in disposable income is greatest in Bulgaria, Latvia and Lithuania. However a number of countries, such as France and Denmark, also saw a rise in disposable income inequality between 2005 and 2013.

- Rates of poverty among employed people are highest in Romania and Greece, but are rising elsewhere in Europe too, including in Germany and Slovenia.

- Women in Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic experience some of the widest gender pay gaps in Europe.

- The difference between the pay of workers and top executives is greatest in countries such as Latvia.

Though many of these countries introduced rampant austerity measures post-2008, little has changed in terms of economic security and instead people at the bottom of society have been mostly affected. Cuts in public spending, the privatization of services, and deregulation of labour markets have done little to reduce economic problems in the Eurozone and instead continued calls have been (and continue to be) made to governments to radically change tax laws so that corporations and companies become accountable to pay their taxes instead of European citizens shouldering the debt burden. In the context of the latter - the increased desire to leave one country to find work in another - almost one third of young people in Europe wish to leave their home country to study, train or work in another as a consequence of feeling marginalised by the financial problems of their home country (Nancy, 2016).

Despite this, a significant portion of western populations have become to accept the core hegemonic message repeated over and over again throughout our culture and mediascapes: we must cut taxes to encourage the forms of investment that create jobs; we must accept that our welfare system is inefficient and that significant numbers of welfare-dependent people are cheats playing the system; we must accept falling wages so that businesses can remain competitive; we must accept growing economic insecurity, and fight hard to make ourselves indispensable to our employers; we must accept that the people who work alongside us do not form a supportive community but are in fact competitors in the battle to reproduce our consumer lifestyles. As compensation for our ongoing political complacency we are granted leave to submerge ourselves in the shallow pleasures of consumerised and mediatised culture.

"Play-based" identities and ideological daydreams of success

The neoliberal shift also created an individual subjective separation from established and traditional social values grounded in stable employment, family and community, producing an existential impasse for many people today: a crisis of who they are, a crisis *being*, known in academic terms as 'ontological insecurity'. Without the past social determinants to direct

humans into what they should *be* and what is expected of them – typical of modern times from the industrial revolution to the Second World War - in the neoliberal era people are instead left to their own devices; they are responsible for themselves. The individual these shoulders structurally-generated problems: *"if you don't have a job, it is your fault".* Very often, it is this individualism which promotes a sort of *'me-against-the-world'* divisiveness, where we are set in a perpetual yet mutual competition with each other, or if we were to extend a familiar Apple marketing strategy, 'Ipod, Ipad, Iworld, I'mtheonlyonewhomatters'. Peoples' values these days tend less to reside in the conceptions of work, family and community but in elastic, individualised identities which are moulded by consumer lifestyles, the online world and the media.

In this way, consumerism acts as a partial compensation that keeps us invested in the political and economic project of neoliberalism. It encourages us to forget what we have lost and instead imagine endless technological innovation and a myriad of new consumer indulgences that will improve our lives and deliver to us enduring happiness, satisfaction and social distinction. And this is why the market needs to create the impression of constant innovation and progressive change in order to keep young consumers enthralled.

Perhaps as a reflection of rampant individualism championed by the Thatcher and Regan years, today's generation, while resenting the insecurity of the world, want to 'be their own bosses'. But that's because they are born into a culture where they have to do things themselves to get anywhere. Yet these preferences are generally unavailable to many young European people because they often enter jobs with little employability, receive low wages and fewer benefits. Entering at the bottom of the ladder in something temporary or part time limits upward social mobility because permanent job opportunities are disappearing. In addition, the work many young Europeans do is generally neither productive or enjoyable; it is 'careerless'. As a consequence, many young people in the middle to lower bracket lack work-based identities and this generates actions and attitudes towards 'opportunism' and 'seizing the moment' because there is no certainty of the future work or career to guide their commitment, thereby accelerating an attitude to spend money, accumulate debt and engage with a series of available distractions from real-life problems (TV, internet, going out and getting drunk, etc).

It is into this void of work-based identity that steps the role of 'play', and leisure and consumer culture as a means of self realisation. 'Play-based identities' are rapidly replacing concepts of 'work' and 'learning' which for some now look increasingly redundant and instead virtual identities, shopping and participation in the night-time economy provides substance to young peoples lives:

> *The development of consumer culture takes capitalism into a new, more sophisticated stage of domination over the masses. Under it, control is accomplished through the 'free' choices made by consumers in leisure and consumption activity. These 'choices' are directed by the culture industry to achieve conformity, docility and the reproduction of capitalist hegemony.* (Rojek, 2005: 72).

It is within these mediums that the ideological realization of success and 'rags-to-riches' stories are also fostered as a youth generation gravitates its subservience to a cultural life bent

around consumer capitalism, media, online life so therefore it is one which absorbs its and reproduces motifs and ideology (Žižek, 2011). This ideology has a binary function: it both keeps the dream alive that anyone who applies *"hard work collects reward"* as it pacifies it; that's to say *"if I fail this exam or can't get a job, there is always a lifeworld of going out, celebrating my youth and updating Facebook statuses which I can enjoy"*. This ideology both subliminally activates young people to chase their dreams and resets that activation - to be winners - while at the same time is ready to welcome them home to the psychological safety of reality TV programmes, Facebook and Twitter when they don't achieve them.

In various forms - both subliminal and overt - these cultural mediums also assist in the manufacture of the 'dream' and 'endless possibilities'. Consider many fractions of reality TV in which the contestants are predominantly from the middle-to-lower class bracket who participate in competitive processes to be famous – either for their talent or lack of talent or for some reason associated with something supposedly related to talent. These very programmes, along with the other digital temptations of Facebook, twitter and Instagram, the nights out, the days in, the shopping experiences[1] and mad holidays all assist in the subjective distraction of real life (Briggs, 2013); a real life which increasingly demands self-motivation and resilience as the core requisites to resolve life's challenges (Bauman, 2007). This is the general cultural context which frame today's youth generation and educational experience as it is within these conditions that an ideological meritocratic initiative flourishes and this is evident in European educational strategy, open competition between countries, and national educational priorities and league tables.

The neoliberalisation of learning: How education is affected by these changes

The neoliberalisation of education affects both attitudes to learning as well as it does both educational institutions. As we have seen in the previous section, strains in the political economy produce inequality and a class system not only render people "winners" and a lot more "losers" but also instils in them an individual competitiveness and sense of responsibilisation for their own personal success. Indeed, incisive marketing campaigns are underway that stimulate symbolic competition among young people (see Hall et al., 2008) and throughout the lifecourse (Winlow et al., 2015). People now feel like they should achieve as part of what is expected of them as much as they expect as themselves, and when achievement stutters in a culture of social distinction, failure is felt twice as hard (Bauman, 2007). This is endorsed in various ways by government policy as is it is in modes of cultural life and media and online institutions. Here I attempt to show precisely how educational institutions have been affected by these processes of neoliberalisation.

Education systems started to become hybridized with a business ethics in the 1980s as neoliberalism took centre stage as an economic system - the idea being that public services like education were inefficient and costly but if brought in line with business ethics and run as a business (Fisher, 2009), would result in increased efficiency (Canaan, 2010). Indeed, nowadays

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[1] Baudrillard (1998) was particularly taken with the unending stream of gadgets that began to flood the market from the 1960s onwards. These products were bought primarily to titillate and distract the consumer, and to convince him/her that he/she had left behind the discomforts of reality to occupy a sphere of affluence, happiness and perpetual novelty.

educational institutions are increasingly run as businesses complete with corporate strategies and branding campaigns, business plans and partnerships, cost-benefit analyses and key performance indicators (Bok, 2009).

This has happened because governmental education funding mechanisms have diminished across Europe and instead enabling a reliance on corporate strategies and business plans as a means of survival. In the context of higher education, for example, this has been labelled "academic capitalism" (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; Winn, 2015) - the regime which contributes to the knowledge economy - which means universities main function now is to help capture knowledge and turn it into products for profit and marketing ventures (see Figure 1). This shift has filtered down to teaching practice in the form of increased administration and pressure to adhere to performance outcomes, related in some cases to higher numbers of students and less time to teach, so that the figures can be used towards marketing strategies to entice spending students also known as 'clients'.

Figure 1 – A typical online advert for an international university

This is imperative because increasingly education facilities at all levels across Europe are out to recruit 'good students' who can get 'good results' which can assist with the reputation, funding and therefore the continued functioning of the educational institution.

The school

[As part of the] *Lisbon Strategy, Europe must place the main emphasis on knowledge and innovation. Promoting a more entrepreneurial culture is an important part of this effort, starting with young people and from school education... Entrepreneurship is a major driver of innovation, competitiveness and growth. The entrepreneurship competence is indispensable for the self-employed, but also relevant for employees within firms of any size. The Lisbon Council in 2000 already included entrepreneurship into the "new basic" skills, considered necessary for all in order to live and work in a knowledge-based society.* (European Commission, 2005: 7)

The notion of the entrepreneur is someone who is a self-made success, some with enterprise and initiative and it is precisely the aim of European powers to cultivate such an individual for the future of European economic growth. Around Europe, schools are increasingly run as businesses, adopting more and more a business-oriented curriculums which revolve around establishing these aptitudes and competencies. This reflects the complete subordination of the education system to

neoliberal ethics which are designed to cultivate young people ready for the economy, as socially responsible people:

> *A successful social business can make a difference on a local, national or global scale; and running one can provide countless real world opportunities for young people. From fundraising and marketing to developing effective partnerships, from business planning to financial management, by setting up a social business within their school community, young people grow skills and take on responsibilities not commonly offered by other learning routes, while teachers can cover curriculum subjects in a relevant, authentic context.* (Schools Service, 2016)[2]

This is increasingly related to the need for schools to improve on performance to be able to climb national and international 'league tables of excellence'. In 2015, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain* which is essentially the largest ever global school rankings which gives league places to 76 countries. One of the main headlines is how schools should make focus on 'access and quality' before making admissions that the 'hoped improvements' - made on reflection of the last report some years earlier - had not been realized by numerous countries as millions of young people still left school without basic education. The main problem the report highlights is the moot pressure of raising standards in a time of educational financial constraints.

Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that "poor-performing schools" around Europe continue to do poorly or have closed (For examples across Europe see OECD, 2012; Law and Swann, 2013).[3] In the UK for example, this resulted in the concept of the Academy which was supposed to offer education managed by companies. The rationale was that these educational institutions would rely on private investment combined by comparison by some government grants, have autonomy over their budgets and curriculums, and would be therefore be able to offer high-class education. In the main, the idea was that this initiative would raise educational standards especially in disadvantaged areas. However, since their conception in 2000, they have come under increasing criticism and, as consequence of their inception, surrounding poor-performing schools have been forced to close; the most concerning aspect being that not all students in the same area were guaranteed a place at the new academies (as they would have been had it have been a public school). Why might this be? A recent report written by the University of Oxford and University of Kingston points who how academies 'are selective in admissions', 'do not teach their local community' and 'exclude poor quality students' as a means to improve their performance, and hence, move up the league tables (Young, 2016).

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[2] Schools Service (2016) c'Leading the way: Schools running as social businesses' cited online on 20th May 2016 at http://schoolsservice.realideas.org/node/1739

[3] The OECD (2012) report shows this taking place in Austria, France, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden while Law and Swann (2013) show how commonplace this is across Europe.

The university

As I have noted, European institutions have committed to a global discovery of new knowledge if it wants to measure up with its competitors in other continents (Figure 2). This is why university ranking and league tables play an increasingly important part in the 'branding' of educational institutions because it is related to a global business which combines performance, marketing and public relations.

Figure 2 – Europe's best universities[4]
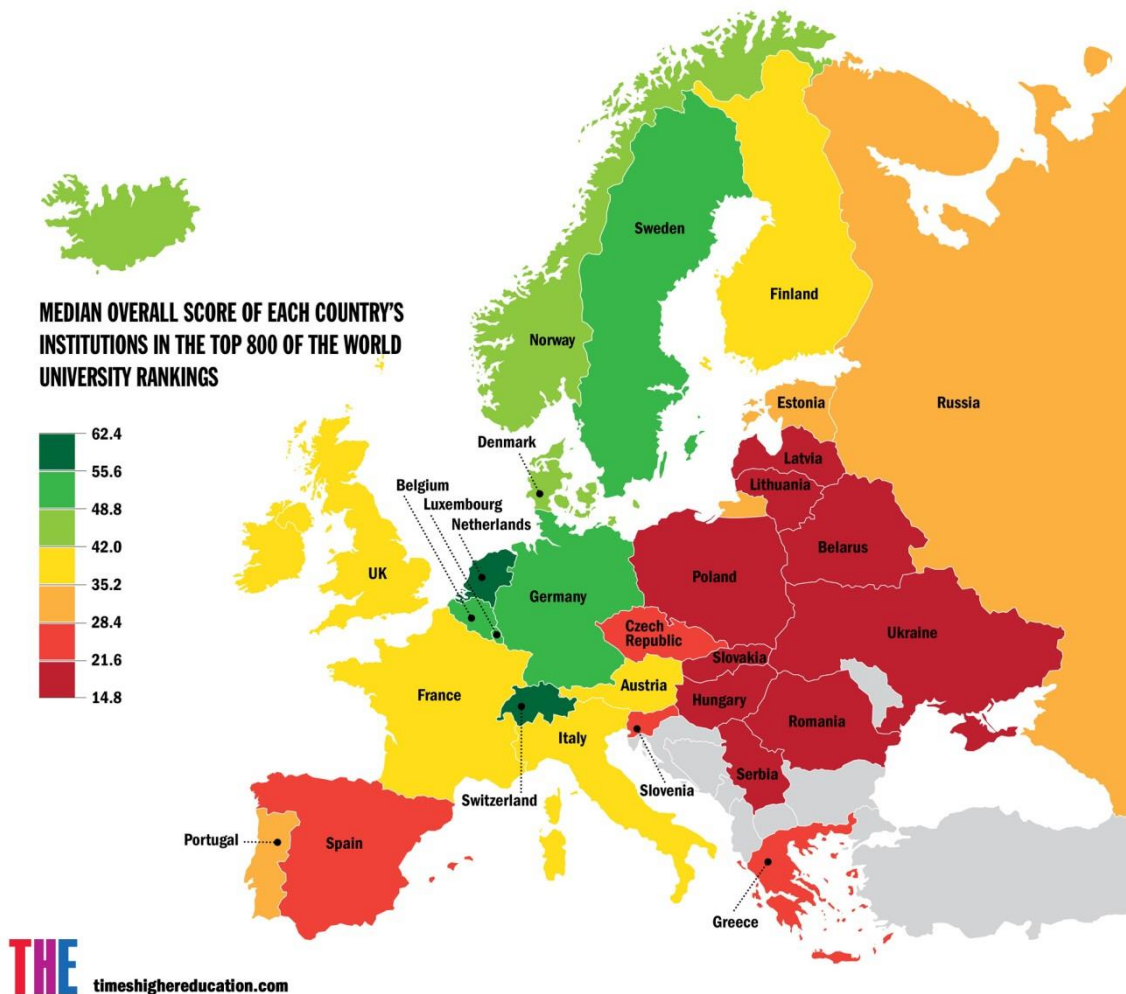
Within this, some European countries are making strategic efforts attract and retain the best student talent Europe has to offer. For example, Scotland's most prestigious universities are increasingly accepting more able foreign students than their home equivalents in an effort to boost their league table status (Johnson, 2015). In Denmark, there are efforts to fast-track employment opportunities external talent which comes through their universities systems as part of the greater internationalization of Danish higher education systems (Myklebust, 2014). Thus, like schools, 'playing the rankings game' has become essential to institutional reputation and survival. This is why the more academics are required to engage in teaching and research

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[4] Cited online at https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/200-best-universities-in-europe-who-is-at-the-top-in-2016

that can be measured as financially or symbolically profitable in a competitive consumer market, with increasing numbers of academics being required to demonstrate loyalty to their university's 'brand' in the construction of education as a "globally-traded commodity" (Amsler and Bolsmann, 2012).

This is a prime example of how universities are increasingly treated as companies with business desires for increasing economic revenues. This is one of the reasons why courses have expanded and hybridized and traditional teaching forums have evolved into distance learning developed, and with the advent of the internet, online degrees – all as business models in their own right (Hall, 2015). The race is on to create and expand new educational markets and improve on annual profits. Relatedly, ever more expensive and risky decisions about how to teach and where or what to study what become economic rather than educational concerns for students (who are pressed to make the right 'investment') and universities (which are concerned to attract paying students in new educational markets). Or as Hall (2015) notes:

> *As the University is incorporated inside the circuits of value production, circulation and accumulation, academic work is driven by production for exchange rather than use. As a result, each facet of academic labour becomes a commodity, governed by a cultural turn towards personalisation and choice, underpinned by student and institutional debt and amplified by narratives of entrepreneurialism.[5]*

These business narratives become as much embedded in the academic practice which takes place in the university as it is in the recruitment campaigns which endorse logos of amazingly perfect-looking and successful young people and mirror motifs loaded with individualism, celebrating the youth experience and doing 'crazy things' (see Figure 3). For example, the marketing campaign in my current institution rings out the notion of neoliberal human capital development: *"Our mission is to help you reach to whatever you can – Your best "me"*.

Figure 3 – A series of Facebook adverts aimed at increasing student sign ups and enrollment. The target market for iXperience is American and European university students.

In short, the neoliberalisation of higher education means that a) institutions should compete to sell their services to student customers and b) and that those institutions should produce specialized highly-trained, skilled workers with expert knowledge that will *"enable the nation to compete freely*

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[5] Hall, R. (2015) 'The university and the secular crisis' in *Open Library of Humanities*, Cited online on 20th May 2016 at https://olh.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/olh.15/

on a global economic stage" (Canaan, and Shumar, 2008: 5). Therefore its commercial expansion relates to the enabling of individuals as economic actors whom are equipped for the economy (Atbach and Knight, 2007), graduate survival in the labour market is dependent on neoliberal attributes such as 'resilience', 'flexibility' and 'adaptability'. However, in a globalized world, the labour market is ever more contracting and progressively precarious and more and more students leave after graduation struggling to find work (Standing, 2011). Thorpe (2008) calls this the 'opportunity trap' whereby the numbers in higher education grow and the graduate jobs lessen. To now analyse what this all means in the context of the inequality in education, I now will examine how this affects and in some ways determines who are the "winners" and "losers".

The "winners": Relative success is relative economically

Perhaps it is no surprise to learn that those people with more wealth and a higher class position tend to come through the education system, get the best results, and qualify for the world's most prestigious universities. For example, evidence from the United States shows that 44.8% of billionaires, "85.2% of powerful men, 55.9% of powerful women" went to "elite schools" (Wai, 2014). Here in Europe, a graduate rich list shows which universities are most likely to churn out the best business people and therefore the wealthiest people. Perhaps as no surprise Oxford University and Cambridge University produced 762 millionaires while the latter has the most billionaires (Gye, 2013). Indeed, it is well known that *"access to university* [in England], *on average, varies substantially by the level of parental income and that students from poorer families access different types of universities than those from wealthier backgrounds"* (Britton et al., 2016: 3).

But there are other indicators which suggest the same. Take student mobility in Europe for example. Naturally, international mobility similarly favors well-developed education systems and institutions as well as economically-advantaged students. This is in the main because many universities are located in countries where governments have significantly cut public funding which has prompted the institutions to engage in ambitious international ventures and participation in competitive research proposals to broaden their research excellence and reputation (see Bothwell, 2016 for examples of Denmark, Netherlands, UK, Spain, Estonia and Finland). The most common initiatives are those related to having branch or even international campuses, franchised degree programs, and partnerships with local institutions. The same institutions are almost forced to go abroad to canvass new business, picking up new international students to thereafter earn higher profits by charging high fees; these countries include Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. And it doesn't end there for international students also spend significant amounts of money in the host countries. In one study, it was estimated that foreign students contributed to $12 billion to the U.S. economy (Davis, 2003). Demand is rapidly increasing and the race is on to secure these new consumers which is why many international higher education services - which are profit oriented - provide access to students in countries lacking the domestic capacity to meet the demand. Already there are forecasts being made that by 2025, there will be around 15 million students studying abroad worldwide (Atbach and Knight, 2007).

Yet, at the same time, this is why a present system which pretends to make these opportunities 'available' to students with lower forms of cultural capital is actually compounding existing inequalities because these students generally can't/don't take advantage of the opportunity, and even if they do, they run a high risk of coming home early. The concept of learning mobility schemes such as Erasmus do not fit with their worldview. Here take a look. This was one of many experiences I had when working as a lecturer who had responsibility over the Erasmus exchanges in my former university:

> It is early in the afternoon and I am in my university office waiting to see who will come in to talk to me about the new Erasmus opportunities. Despite having mentioned it in all my lectures thus far this year, only one person from the 50 I have has submitted an application to study abroad. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the institution and its physical location in a deprived London borough and low university league status, the profile of my cohort is largely working class young people from the local area mixed with foreign paying students from countries like Nigeria and India and a scattering of Eastern European students from places like Poland, Lithuania and Romania and Bulgaria. After waiting nearly two hours, I am about to leave for the day before there is a knock at my door. It is one of the many underperforming students I have whose name is Liam who has come to enquire about Erasmus. I go to sit down and ask him to come in but instead he stays at the door telling me *"I only got a quick question".* I say *"go on then"* and he asks me in a serious way *"are the birds* [young women] *fit* [pretty] *on the Erasmus exchange?"* [Field notes]

For Liam, and many other working class young people, the concept of Erasmus is not about learning about other cultures, living abroad and engaging in an international learning environment - something which fits with someone from a higher class bracket - but is about going out, getting drunk and having sex with young women. His lifeworld sees the potential opportunity as something else which doesn't necessarily benefit his professional future as it would someone from a higher class bracket. He sees the experience as a form of play. In the end, Liam didn't complete his studies, dropping out due to having amassed thousands of pounds of debt having gone out drinking and partying.

So it is this sector of society - one which has financial resources to secure their educational futures - that are more likely to benefit from educational opportunity such as mobility programs as well as be the same people who earn substantially more than their disadvantaged counterparts when they manage to secure jobs after their degrees (see Britton et al., 2016). It is a cohort to take advantage of such opportunities because of their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) - skills which help to enable social mobility - which is one of the main reasons for their labour market success. They are people who are able to initiate their own willingness to invest in their own human capital, in order to become productive and as a result socially-useful (Hall, 2015). Unfortunately, this is not something everyone has as we shall see.

The "losers" who bought the dream sold to them: Conveyor-belt education

So while we see a general tendency for the middle to upper bracket of the social sector in Europe who can come through the education system, do well and secure jobs post-graduation, we see a growing middle-lower and lower bracket who struggle with the education experience.

This is not to say all fail school but generally come through, not achieving highly and equipping themselves with the minimum to be able to take the next step to university. The dilemma here is that they may not qualify for a good university with a good league table position and with good employment outcome results. This doesn't necessarily matter though. This is because universities are under immense pressure to secure a particular number of students to arrive at a strategic outcome and when potential student numbers may not be reach projected goals in an institution which does not have a high university ranking or employability rates, there can often be flexibility with allowing other students on to the courses to reach required revenue and so that the course can run. Look what happens in both the UK and Spain:

> It is a Tuesday and I am undertaking my annual clearing duty [at a university in the UK] – a process which we are all as academics obliged to do each year which involves taking calls from prospective students who didn't get the grades they wanted to go to the university of their choice and now have to phone around to see if another institution will accept them. For our degree program, we are still massively short of our allocated target imposed by the Vice Chancellor. We are asking for a base mark of 140 points but many of the calls we have had have been from students with less than 120. Nevertheless we have to document their details, name, address, contact number and points obtained. I have been sitting here all day having spent little time on the telephone, waiting for someone to call me. To summarise the calls I have had so far is to say that I had a call from a Nigerian man who says he came to the country in 2003 and wants to study Criminology. When I ask him what he has done over the last 10 years, he tells me *"thinking about studying Criminology"*. The call finishes shortly after. Then an email is sent around to us with an urgent flag on it. It is from our Dean who has lowered the points we ask from our students from 140 to 120. Now we are to contact everyone who has phoned and declared their 120 points to miraculously offer them a place on the degree at the university of their dreams. [Field notes from the UK]

> At work one morning, I am invited as usual for a coffee with some colleagues [at a university in Spain]. There is some bother and mild moaning this morning as we join the café queue as several of my colleagues had to spend their Saturday at the other campus doing "interviews" to canvass for new student admissions on the courses. There is the usual criticism of the students abilities which they tried to interrogate in the interview but more of their unease is directed at the fact that the 'interview' is not a real test per se but a mere formality which secures the €13,000 per year fee-paying student on a course of their choice. One says *"at other universities, both in public and private, the student needs to take a test and pass but here we just talk to them for a while and because they pay us money – they pay our wages – we allow them on to the courses"*. [Field notes from Spain]

Moreover, although people in this bracket come motivated to university, they are massively unprepared – in almost every way, socially, culturally, personally, academically - for the expectations which await them:

> I talking to a colleague about a new Masters programme on Organised Crime we have started to offer [at a university in the UK]. Our institution, as one which could be

recognized for this field of study, has little reputation though over the period of the last summer, we have started to see some successful recruitment of foreign students to various Social Science degrees largely thanks to the efforts of our International Marketing Team. He hands me seven applications for his new Masters course, all of which are from students from the Middle East, India and Pakistan and asks me to review them to see if I think they are apt for the course. I agree and sit down and start to review them. There is only one problem: none of them can write basic English. I return my notes to my colleague recommending that they shouldn't be admitted to the course for those reasons. Two weeks later, the same colleague approaches me and tells me all seven were accepted on to the course. I am between laughing and crying in a sort of 'did-that-just-happen' state. I'm then told that because each student is paying €20,000 each year for their studies (€140,000 per year for two years) that the Department needed the revenue and we had to somehow to support them through their studies…some months later, my colleague shows me some of the work the students have completed and it is a mix between plagiarism and broken English. [Field notes]

Many of these people admitted on to these courses in these low-ranking institutions therefore have less cultural capital than those getting better marks and who attend higher-ranking institutions evident in what Ball et al. (1999) show, class divisions often determine learning attitudes, aspirations and motivations. Moreover in the former, the support mechanisms are minimal for these students who often have higher needs (Reay, 2010) and face more structural barriers from study to work (Dolado et al., 2013), and as a consequence, face increasing stratification in the job market because of how the university reflects the various gradations of the class system (Jenkins et al., 2011). Class values matter for, as we saw with Liam, in the advent of continual consumer temptations, a potential serious future of hard work and educational self-investment can come undone by the possibility of endless solipsistic pleasures of the 'good life' and here is how 'play-based identities' merge with the trinkets and endless 'experiences' of the consumer world. This is the kind of thing which happens in Ibiza[6] every year:

We manage to find an internet café on a side street from the main drinking strip. While my colleague checks her Facebook, I hang around and see two slim, young British men come in, both looking a little worse for wear; one carries a plastic bag with him. They go up to the bored Spanish woman at the desk and ask how much the internet costs. *'20 mins for a euro'* she says and one of the thin figures starts to fish around in his pocket but among the bronze coins cannot find much. I suggest they use the internet after us as we won't need all the time as they don't seem to have money between them. They appreciate this and offer me a cigarette as we wait to use the computer. We lean against the building, smoking while the evening gets underway on the West End and people walk past in their best summer gear. It soon transpires they have been here for three weeks and are both working out here…until one, Greg, confesses he is still *'looking for work out here'* as he quit his commission-only job because it was *'shit money'* [earning €25 a night yet accommodation costs €20]. He came out having quit

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[6] Ibiza, a Spanish island in the Mediterranean, is one of the party capitals of the world.

his job in the UK. The other, Rob, has a job selling boat tickets for Pukka Up [a notorious booze cruise which leaves from the Marina] and Stormbabes [another similar cruise where topless women dance around to music]. At the moment, they are sleeping on the beach to save money for an apartment and have their clothes at a friend's apartment. When Rob says he has spent over £2,000, I choke on my cigarette (and I don't even smoke it properly) but then he reassures me he has his *'ten grand student loan in the bank'* but *'won't be going back to uni now'* [because he has decided to work in Ibiza]. They say Es Paradis and Eden are boring but then boast about their escapades in *'Pacha the other night'*, saying how I would like it because it is full of *'older people'* at which I take no offence and laugh. [Field notes]

These are several reasons why large numbers drop out and only increasingly precariousness awaits them in the search for temporary work (mostly likely in the exploitative service sector) or perhaps changing degree. For those students in this class bracket who graduate, very often there is a human capital mismatch with the economy in that in the majority of cases their degrees which are fairly useless in the current economic climate and/or respective industry - this means many leave university and forced to jobs designed for people with lower or no qualifications. Eichhorst, and Neder (2014) call this 'overeducation' (also see Dolado et al., 2013). The jobs they then find are generally unsatisfactory, often being in the service sector and for poor wages in uncertain conditions (Standing, 2011). For example, these young people from Spain, one of whom has now concluded his studies while the other finishes this year, recognized this problem:

> *Look, in Spain almost everyone is in discontent. Many people are out of work, people are going to university for no reason. Before the crisis, unemployment was bad but now it is far, far worse. I am unemployed and can't get work. I know people who have left for the UK where there are jobs. People I know are getting cash-in-hand jobs or in shops but don't keep them long. Others just temporary work before they are practically begging off their families…The problem are the banks and the political system. They got us in this mess and are asking us to pay for it. What they have done here is opened business in places like China because it is cheaper which makes for a surplus population of people who have no work and are not qualified to do anything else than what they know. But they have cut so much and what is next? Education and Health. They have sacked doctors, professionals, services. In education, teachers, specialists educational workers. All lost their jobs.* [Alberto, 28, Seville, Spain]

> *New study plans, degrees, combined degrees, Masters, attractive offers full of empty promises. The Spanish universities have lost their purpose for education and become large businesses, that paradoxically, which in the main forget the student. In the Spanish universities, we have been relegated to the function of customer in the purchase/sale of knowledge.* [Silvia, 22, Salamanca, Spain]

How then to break out of this cycle? To further their education and invest in themselves. Yet even as they undertake Masters and other bogus educational qualifications like online diplomas which are not officially recognised, secure solutions are distant as many young people go from short, fixed-term contracts, temporary work and often voluntary work with no

real improvement to their job situation (Standing, 2011). Indeed, evidence put forward by Croll (2008) shows that in the UK these initially disadvantaged young graduates pretty much continue to be disadvantaged despite the fact that the "choice" of work on offer is real, they are heavily constrained from realizing it (See De Pietro 2014 for evidence from Germany and Dolado et al. 2013 from Spain).

However, all is not lost because they are motivated people having completed their degrees, perhaps against expectation yet come out in debt, and are thereafter persuaded that they just need more "patience" and/or "experience". Typically a way out of this cycle may be to further invest in human capital, undertake another degree, perhaps online, in the hope that this can improve the credentials or CV which may help them switch career (Christensen, and Eyring, 2014). Then it is only a matter of time before they consider changing their career and, of course, the university education system is well set up to receive applications from people who will pay more money to potentially improve their own career circumstances. This endless cycle which demands persistent human capital investment what I call 'conveyor-belt education' (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Conveyor belt education
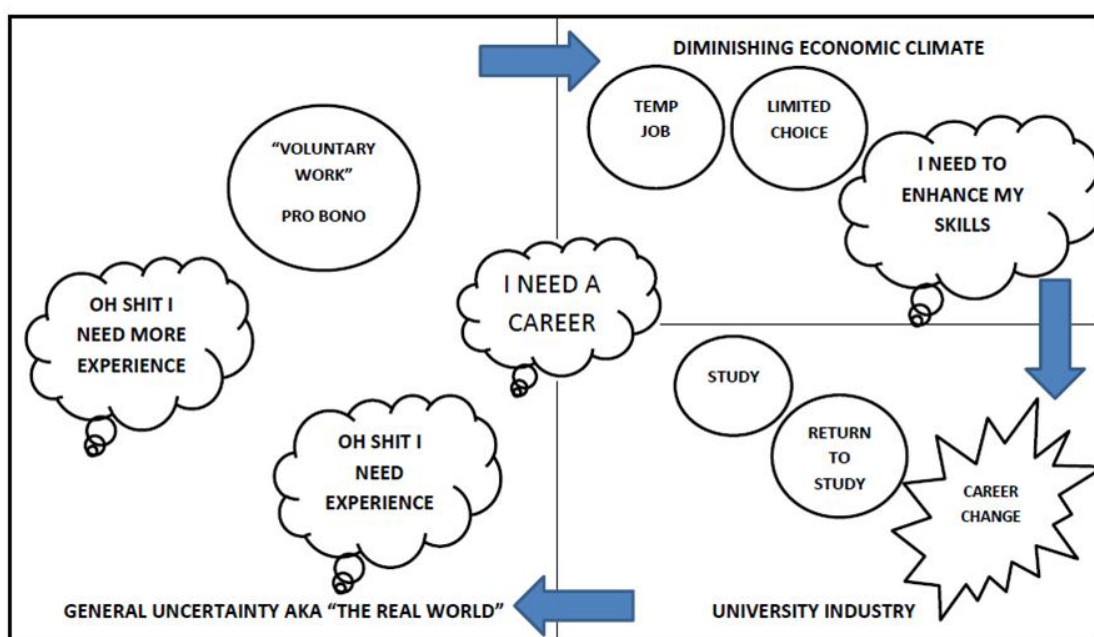
'Conveyor-belt education' is the likely pathway for these people in the middle to lower brackets who study a degree which has low labour market prospects - either because the market for that degree is already saturated or it is mismatched with the degree of study - and thereafter enter into doing pro-bono or voluntary work as a means of getting experience or getting a temporary job likely unrelated to their program of study. When they realize that this provisional situation is not ideal, or see from the outset that the odds of labour market success with just a degree are set against them, they seek to further their human capital - more courses. However, many others like them are doing the same and the result is that despite their investment in further study, they enter into a similar competitive scenario. The result? Many reason that it may be already time for a career change but even then that may not be

enough and as Alberto indicated, working in the informal economy cash-in-hand often becomes the way of life.

***The losers who dream the dream*: Bust in Monte Carlo**

In cities around Europe, the experience of those living on the precipice of society is ever more present with the rampant increase in inequality. Some of these families are native, others second generation immigrant families and some of whom are recently arrived in a bid to escape war and misery in another country. They experience exclusion in a variety of ways in that they live in politically-disenfranchised and socially-neglected urban spaces, have exhausted limited educational avenues to them, therefore being locked out of formal labour markets, and in an effort to sustain themselves, likely do so in the informal economies. With the wealth of the city in their face, and only their poverty in their hands, they attempt to do what they can do get by and sustain a dignified life. While their socio-economic position plays a direct role in their circumstances, for most, it is precisely the fleeting experience of education which reproduces and reinforces their own exclusion, leaving only illegitimate avenues available (For examples across Europe see Madanpour et al., 1998; Wacquant, 2007; Young, 1999).[7] This is the group in the European statistics who fail to get a basic education.

In the context of the UK school system for example, from an early age young people in this cohort do not turn up on a regular basis to school, spending their time between alternative dumbed-down educational courses sporadically attending and the streets. Many develop from early ages, lifestyles and routines which are massively out of sync with conventional requirements which they would otherwise need to attend school and get an education. In the main, these lifestyles compose of hanging around on the streets, late nights playing on computers, and/or taking drugs – all of which directly impacts on affect the motivation to attend anything. These lifestyles are augmented by potentially long distances to travel, unchallenging courses and programmes, and the pressure from others whom also had fragile commitment levels, to skip class or leave at lunch. This young girl from a poor area in London had already been expelled from four different secondary schools in the area and was sent to an alternative form of education which was not recognized by any formal curriculum in the UK; the essence of these programmes fell between not offering anything of substance yet tendering to their basic needs by offering them a place to go with a bit of food and entertainment:

> *Like it started well* [attending alternative education] *but then I did the same thing, started going in late, not turning up, leaving at lunch [with others]. I was alright then I was bored of it, like too easy, like then I was running out with other people who was there because they were bad people as well.* [Maria, 14, UK]

For staff in these safety-net agencies who have to deal with very problematic young people on the cusp if not already immersed in criminal activity, the persistence needed to constantly phone and chase up certain young people exhausting. In these field notes recorded from one

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[7] Wacquant (2007) covers this process in detail in the context of France, Young (1999) in the UK, and Madanipour et al. (1998) who cover extensively countries like Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Germany.

visit to one alternative education provider, my arrival seems to trigger the mid-morning 'phone around'. On this particular day, of the twelve who should have been present at 10am, only five had arrived at 11am:

> One can see, when faced with repeated responses like 'I'm on my way' or 'the bus has problems', how frustrating it can be for staff. After not getting through to some pupils, large efforts were made to leave non-judgemental messages asking for their whereabouts and expected arrival time but they were visibly tired of making these calls. The frustration continued, however, when the worker started to call parents [the next step in the protocol], and even their responses appeared to be quite laissez-faire: 'I told her to go' and 'he'll probably be there in 20 minutes' were mimed to me as responses from one parent while the worker started to shake her head. [Field notes]

In addition, on referral to these kind of educational schemes, many young people find themselves interacting with 'problematic' others and have to negotiate old adversaries and new enemies from the streets. This also has implications for how some see themselves – *"I am with this group of kids who got kicked out of school, they don't care, why should I?"*

> *What they do is kick you out of school, so you can go centre* [alternative education], *then it isn't very good but what some schools don't realise is that you are with even worse children. Within two weeks, you know the people, you go here, you go there, they call you on weekend and you end up robbing someone or you get robbed.* [Dominic, 15, UK]

In this way, such informal settings do not tend to invoke high levels of commitment. Here my field notes record my initial experiences of another alternative educational learning environment in another poor area of London:

> I turned up around 11.30am, and outside there were a few girls smoking. One was Dinah who I was there to meet. She was trying to suck as much out of the cigarette as possible and her friend was trying to persuade her to give up – maybe because, as I later discovered, she was pregnant. We went inside and waited around to be let in – there didn't appear to be anyone around of authority but when we finally went in and a lady showed us into the main hall where a young man was slowly getting out the tables. It was a community hall, with some chairs randomly placed in the room. Another pair were playing chess in the corner. It looked a little haphazard and disorganised. A table was set up for us in the corner for us to do the interview but there was too much noise in the room – one young chap started banging tables and playing music on his phone so we moved to the reception area which was more public. Dinah seemed to be quite aggressive to the lady in charge while to me she seemed calm. The lady in charge seemed unmoved by her attitude and slowly walked off. Throughout the time in the reception, young people seem to drift in and out to smoke, talk on their mobiles and generally 'hang around'. I was later to learn that in afternoon, they were to sit a 'GCSE exam in Maths'. [Field notes]

In a climate of pressure on inner-city urban schools to achieve, and risk threats to funding withdrawals (Osler and Starkey, 2005), a mixture of subtle and blatant social exclusion

processes severely damaged young peoples' chances of an education across Europe (Arthurson and Jacobs, 2003). Increasingly schools, under budget pressures, are unprepared to provide expensive and intensive educational support for the 'problematic' pupils because poor results may affect their league table status (Berridge et al. 2001; Brodie, 1999; McIntyre-Bhatty, 2008). So these students don't stay in education long; there is little interest in supporting and they are a social and financial burden to the school.

Once again, we return to the issue of class status as it is as much family and social disadvantage that plays a part in dropping out or being excluded from school as it is the cultural mismatch of class values – the school institution often projects middle class values upon lower class groups which sets them up to fail when they are demonised by teachers, experience discrimination and are not offered help with weak subjects (Willis, 1977; Pitts, 2007). Most lose interest, 'play up in class' and become disaffected, preferring to tap into urban street cultures and hang around on street corners, play computer games and/take drugs. While a few are clearly exposed to this urban street culture from a young age, and this had some bearing on the secondary school performance if they get that far, it is this socio-cultural backdrop which becomes more prominent for most as life in mainstream school erodes (Pitts, 2007) as it is the consumer attractions of shopping and the online diversions of Facebook and Twitter (Hall et al., 2008).

When young people are 'excluded', they are confused at the reasons why, are not clear about the implications and what they would be working towards and it's educational worth. Many feel angry and this appears to carry over into other areas of their lives. Parents also have little idea about the process and tend to be unaware of their rights. Tokenistic attempts are made to re-integrate them back into some form of education, while young people are left to navigate themselves through the bureaucratic and disorganised nature of the educational alternatives (see OECD, 2012 and Sayer and Vanderhoeven, 2000 for examples across Europe). But without support and direction, many do not know how to progress. So by the time some start alternative educational courses, their out-of-sync lifestyles and skewed learning attitudes are already well-established; lifestyles which are augmented by potentially long distances to travel, unchallenging courses, possible meetings with adversaries and the pressure from others who also have fragile commitment levels to 'hang around on the streets'. Taken together, this lays the potential foundations for most to be vulnerable to multidimensional forms of social exclusion, crime and victimisation (see Arthurson and Jacobs, 2003; Briggs, 2010; Pitts, 2007).

Concluding thoughts and a forecast

In this short report, I have tried to discuss some elements of inequality in education which I don't think get mentioned much. I have done this mostly by using some ethnographic data from previous projects which are related to this area and have refrained from cramming unnecessary statistics and graphs into the report to deliver a different message. Numbers tell us the extent of a problem, but observations and young peoples' words give us a clue as to why things are how they are. Naturally, as people concerned with improving the future for these people, we must contextualize all this using the appropriate theories and perspectives which correctly frame those narratives rather than talk up the same solutions to the same problems.

I have tried to show that inequality in education is inextricably linked to neoliberal social changes which have impacted Europe over the last 40 years. Inequality does not derive from nor can be directly tackled by the education system alone, but I have tried to argue that it is the sharpening experience of inequality which is impacting on both educational systems as it is to learning attitudes and how opportunity is seized by different sections of society.

Our times are those of major economic instability. Major corporations and companies continue to shed jobs, training contracts are dissolving, graduate opportunities reduce, and stable jobs are diminishing and being replaced by short-term or temporary contracts and volunteering. In essence the competencies young people pick up along their educational trajectories are so that they can be resilient and survive in the volatile labour market. Young people coming through European education systems are, in the words of numerous European policy documents, being "prepared for the economy" - which, by a strange coincidence - is extremely fragile and uncertain.

Their navigation of this uncertainty is augmented by a meritocratic ideology which pervades postmodern cultural life, in media, popular literature, and online forums and this assists in adverting and selling the idea that this individualised form of success will be provided in exchange for participation in the education system. Yet there is a tension in this commercial ideology as concepts of learning and work are increasingly eroded by ones revolving around 'play', and this is a considerable distraction and interruption to young peoples' ability to dedicate themselves to their futures. As we have seen resilience and self-motivation can be battered by the potential fun to be constructed on an Erasmus exchange or a holiday of drinking and sex. So this ideology both subliminally activates young people to chase their dreams - to be winners - while at the same time is ready to welcome them home to the psychological safety of the commercial distractions of X Factor and Twitter when they don't achieve them. So the ideology has a binary function: it both keeps the dream alive that anyone who applies 'hard work collects reward' as it pacifies it; that's to say *"if my dream cannot be achieved, there is always a lifeworld of going out, celebrating my youth and updating Facebook statuses which I can enjoy"*.

When cuts in education funding prompt those very same systems to become increasingly bound to business ethics and the cultivation of individual meritocratic initiative, a competitiveness ensues and this is what forges out the most capable from the least capable, or in the context of this article, the "winners" and "losers"; their assemblage being made according to their socio-economic class bracket. I suggest that there is a middle-to-upper bracket who bode well in education systems, generally seizing the opportunities which are presented to them, who achieve above average, continue through the education system to good higher education institutions and in the main find work reasonably easily, thereby completing what is expected of them and their class orientation. These people are supported economically throughout their studies and mostly complete debt free. These young people become the "winners".

There are then two groups below them, both of which are growing in size, who seem to be the "losers" in this process. The middle-to-lower bracket, now less and less likely to enter into vocational courses, training and jobs as they might have done 50 years ago, are now

persuaded that hard work at school and a university degree guarantees them the success in the job market. The rhetoric of European inclusivity policy here points to commitments to ensure that the young people of Europe get access to higher education so that beyond that can compete in the labour market having upskilled themselves. However, as we have seen, there is a significant pool of these young people who are being coerced into the commercial engine of the university industry and either drop out or, having completed their studies, find it almost impossible to find stable work: in the main, these people drift between temporary contacts under shambolic working conditions, "pro bono" work and/or return to study to further equip themselves with human capital.

Those that make it through the process, come out with an impractical degree from a dud institution, significant debt, and struggle to find stable work, often doing voluntary work, more courses and perhaps getting temporary work from time to time. They become embroiled in what I call 'conveyor-belt education', a process which puts them on a treadmill of getting nowhere other than somewhere which is only temporary. However, millions of other young people fall out of this process, often because of the debt they accumulate and/or because the learning philosophies in these education systems are not in line with what is expected of them and what they expect of themselves. Their cultural capital is not in sync with educational philosophies and vice versa. The fact these young people, at various stages drop out of education, means they generally risk their own legitimate futures. There have been pockets of complaints about this in the form of protests but in the main the delights of the consumer world keep them distracted thus locking in this predicament so they never quite realize their systemic victimization.

The rhetoric of European inclusivity policy here points to commitments to ensure that the young people of Europe get access to higher education so that beyond that can compete in the labour market having upskilled themselves. However, as we have seen, there is a significant pool of young people who are being coerced into the commercial engine of the university industry and either drop out or, having completed their studies, find it almost impossible to find stable work: in the main, these people drift between temporary contacts under shambolic working conditions, "pro bono" work and/or return to study to further equip themselves with human capital.

The second group of "losers" are those who barely access education systems. This group occupy an extremely precarious position in society often completely disenfranchised from accessing formal support mechanisms. In many cases, education systems do not recognize and fail to devote support to these people as a) it costs a lot of money which governments don't have (because it has been shifted to private accounts in the Caymen Islands or spent on pointless public space projects which look nice but don't benefit society in the slightest) and b) including them means processing them through formal systems and in a climate of student performance outcomes and school and university league tables, there is little to motivate them to support this group.

This report points to the need to look beyond specific policy interventions or educational programmes and consider the wider problems we face in a society which is demanding an ugly and unhealthy form of competitiveness from its citizens. If the policies we have designed

worked, then I wouldn't be writing these words or be talking at this event in Budapest. Now is not the time to continue to pursue something which doesn't work or throw money at something which sounds good to politicians but instead take our heads out of the sand and take a real look at what's going on. Perhaps more than anything, it invites the reader to consider three main points:

1. The faults of an education system which perceives everyone to have the same capacity for human capital investment and that success awaits every young person can engage their own meritocratic initiative.

2. The sheer injustice of backing an education system that is content to lure in young people who pay thousands of pounds and who leave thousands in debt, providing them with little support to adjust culturally, socially and academically along the way while, at the same time, welcome back 'failures', to second chance them, without providing them with the actual opportunity in the labour market to realise the fruits of their hard work. Educational institutions as private enterprises do no favours to people from the margins and don't really improve the real-life chances of those in the middle to lower bracket.

3. How the long-term consequences of sidelining low-achievers and/or already living in conditions of social and spatial exclusion likely result in the (continued) criminalization of those groups and the social costs thereafter burdonising other social institutions (Police, Prisons, Health, etc). Continued funding withdrawal from assisting in this area only compounds this problem and later results in higher social costs.